



# SACROSANCT OR SECULAR? : A CRITICAL STUDY OF EMILE DURKHEIM'S FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE ON RELIGION

Sukriti Bhukkal

Research Scholar, Ph.D., Panjab University, Chandigarh, India.

## ABSTRACT

Among the schools of thought on religion that have developed within the purview of sociology, functionalism has been associated with Emile Durkheim. It describes religion with regard to the requirements of the society and the role it plays in their fulfillment. Religion is a dichotomous concept and tends to rely on the differentiation between two categories of the sacred and the profane. The system of mystical attachment with an object whether animate or inanimate, is actually the veneration of the society itself. Totemism finds its expression amidst the Australian Aborigines and the tribal in India. Shared core principles and value consensus are essential for the existence of the society in its cohesive form. While religion reinforces the interdependence of individual entities within a society and has exhibited unifying characteristics, it also has been a source of division and a cause of friction. Despite what may seem sometimes to be a dysfunctional role, religion and the functional status ascribed to it continues to be relevant especially, in simpler or even in modern contexts and provides a basis for further comprehension.

**KEYWORDS:** religion, society, function, totem, collectivism, conflict.

Religious beliefs in their varied forms mark their presence in every known society and this precise variation occupies a territory beyond a singular definition. Within sociological methods – two prominent approaches referred to as 'functionalist' and 'substantive' have evolved. The functionalist school of thought evaluates religion keeping in mind the societal needs and is majorly concerned with the contribution that religion makes in fulfilling those needs. Viewed from this perspective, the society needs an optimum amount of social cohesion and value consensus among its entities within which religion plays a relevant role.

Emile Durkheim, a Jewish-French sociologist formulated this approach in his 1912 book, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life) although it had been propounded earlier by Fustel de Coulanges albeit in a less comprehensible form. The primary purpose of Durkheim in the book was to identify the social origin and function of religion as he felt that it was a source of camaraderie and integration. Secondly, he sought to understand the empirical, social aspect of religion that is common to all religions and goes beyond the concepts of spirituality and God.

## DICHOTOMY OF RELIGION:

Durkheim presented what is probably the most influential interpretation of religion from a functionalist viewpoint and argued that in societies, a distinction is created between what is 'sacred' and 'profane.' Religion is based upon this differentiation and he defined it as a 'unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community...' As can be observed, in Durkheim's theory, the communal characteristics of religion are highlighted; the function of religion customs and rituals is to affirm the moral dominance of the society over its individual constituents. Furthermore, he asserted that, 'by sacred things one must not understand simply those personal things which are called gods or spirits; a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word anything can be sacred.' There is nothing peculiar about the objects he mentions that makes them sacred. According to him, the correlation between symbols and what they represent must be established.

## THE 'TOTEM':

To validate his argument, Durkheim in his study utilized the religion of various groups of Australian Aborigines. The Aborigine society is divided into several clans and each clan has a 'totem', usually an animal or a plant which is then represented on drawings, called 'churingas', on wood or stones. A totem may be a symbol, or an emblem associated with the clan or, 'it is its flag; it is the sign by which each clan distinguishes itself from all others.' However, it should be noted that the totem is more than the churinga which represents it- it is the most sacred object in the Aborigine ritual i.e., it is 'the outward and the visible form of the totemic principle or god.' In the Indian context too, totemism is widely practiced among the tribal groups. For instance, the Dumariyan clan worships the cluster fig (Udumbara) tree for the gift of a child. The Todas' economy, culture, morality and their religious life revolves around the totemic animal. Durkheim further suggested that in worshipping god people are in fact, worshipping society which can be inferred to be the real object that demands religious devotion. He articulates that 'the god of the clan can be nothing but the clan itself.' The logic he put forth for this line of reasoning is that the society must be conceptualised and accepted as being more powerful than a human. Sacred things are considered 'superior in dignity and power to profane things and particularly to man.' In light of the

sacred, humans are dependent and in general, lesser beings. Also, the society instead of worshipping itself directly, takes recourse to totems because it is easier for a person to 'visualise and direct his feelings of awe toward a symbol than towards so complex a thing as a clan.'

## COLLECTIVE CONSCIENCE:

Durkheim advocated the idea that social life was not plausible in the absence of shared values and moral beliefs that form the 'collective conscience.' In the lack of their presence, it would be difficult to achieve social order, social regulation, or co-operation. It would not be an exaggeration to say that according to Durkheim, if religion did not exist, the society would not either. Religion strengthens or reaffirms the actual existence of the civil world around us. The worship of society reinforces the core principles and values that establish the foundation of social life. By delineating them as sacred, religion imparts them with greater authority to guide human action. The respectful attitude towards the sacred is the identical behaviour that is directed towards social codes of conduct and obligations. While worshipping society, people are, in effect, identifying the significance of the social group and their reliance on it. As a consequence, religion cements the coherence of the group and promotes harmony.

Durkheim also focused on the importance of 'collective worship' – wherein the social group gathers together for participation in rituals characterised by excitement and admiration. Its members express their trust in common values and beliefs. During this exceedingly thrilling atmosphere of collective worship, the unity of the group is enhanced.<sup>3</sup> The members of the society convey, communicate, and comprehend the bonds of morality that weave them together. Moreover, Durkheim claims that the faith in gods or spirits which normally provide for the focal point for religious ceremonies originated from the belief in the ancestral spirits of deceased relatives – hence, the worship of gods is actually the devotion towards the familial souls. He also recognized that souls represent the existence of social values, the collective conscience is inherent in individuals. Therefore, yet again the sociologist determines that religious activities related to veneration are actually the worship of the social unit.

## CRITIQUE OF DURKHEIM:

T.B. Bottomore stated that in the study of civilised society Durkheim's theory has proved to be less valuable, 'for here religion is as frequently a divisive as a unifying force. That is to say that while it 'unites particular groups, it may provoke conflict between these groups within the larger society.' On the one hand, there are examples of all-encompassing societies tied by religion such as the states of 'medieval Christendom' and certain Islamic states but on the other hand, there have been pertinent cases in modern industrial along with democratic societies where religion is a cause of disruption – in particular, those societies or nations that are religiously diverse and this is, irrespective of their statements or declaration of them being secular states. Also, digression from established religious norms does not always entail distrust. Though, according to Durkheim's theory it may imply an opposition to the collective conscience, it has in fact, led to various forms of positive social change particularly, in the realm of basic human rights that had been for ages, violated under the guise of religious sanction. His analysis does not fully succeed in finding conclusive proof in societies that have multiple sub – cultures, social and ethnic groups, dedicated organisations, and a plurality of religious practices, intentions and motivations. Additionally, in contemporary societies ,ideologies and value system possess more meaning than cus-

toms or rituals, 'for men tend to unite or divide upon propositions rather than upon sentiments.' Most sociologists are of the opinion that Durkheim may have overplayed his discourse. The functional status of religion has been found to be more fitting in the simpler, ascriptive societies which demonstrate a close-knit interdependence of culture and institutions or the diffusion of work, leisure, education, and family ties. Later anthropologists like Bronislaw Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown have shown in their respective field studies that religion works in primitive societies and is able to uphold conduct and cohesion.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

Even though the above critical perceptions are apposite, it cannot be refuted that Durkheim has contributed extensively to the understanding of religion. For example, William E. Paden argues that Durkheim's observations about religion can be appreciated vis-à-vis the symbolic importance of the Western Wall in Jerusalem for Jews.<sup>4</sup> In India and specifically in Sikhism, the Five Ks that are the five items namely, 'Kesh, Kangha, Kara, Kachera, and Kirpan'<sup>5</sup> are important symbols of the faith that Guru Gobind Singh commanded Khalsa Sikhs to wear at all times. They are vital markers of identity in collective worship and hold the community together and are seen in their manifestation to be promoting empathy and concord. Thus, despite its shortcomings, Durkheim's work continues to be one of the leading reference points for modern social contemplation.

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#### **Notes:**

- I. The Ancient City, demonstrates the impact of religion in the creation of larger groupings and maintaining them in existence.
- II. The term 'totem' refers to a natural object or an item either inanimate or animate with which a group of individuals identify themselves. The system of mystical attachment of groups of people with totems is called 'totemism.' The 'totemic group' has ideological, mystical, emotional, reverential and genealogical relationship with the totems.
- III. This idea can also be understood in the Indian context via the examples of events such as Durga Pooja or Kumbh Mela.
- IV. Western Wall also called the Wailing Wall, in the Old City of Jerusalem a place of prayer and pilgrimage sacred to the Jewish people. It is the only remains of the retaining wall surrounding the Temple Mount, the site of the First and Second Temples of Jerusalem, held to be uniquely holy by the ancient Jews.
- V. For detailed information visit: <https://www.sikhdharma.org/the-5-ks-kara-kesh-kirpan-kacheras-kanga/>